

Crises of Legitimacy and Espitemes and the Institutionalisation of Gender Studies in the Academia

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“The legitimate renunciation of a certain style of causality perhaps does not give one the right to renounce all etiological demands.” Alice A. Jardine uses this quote from Jacques Derrida as an epigraph with which she starts her third the chapter of her book entitled *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1995). In what follows I shall try to deliver the results of a short research into the reasons why gender studies came to the forefront of the interdisciplinary research known as cultural studies in these recent years. Many researchers have already tried to explain the recent interest into the causes that led to the rise of academic interest in gender studies. Some of them claim that it is a logical conclusion to the spread of capitalism. Others like Jardine in the third chapter of the book mentioned above have related them to scientific progress. I would argue that unless this issue is placed within the context of a series of crises in legitimacy that have marked history since the English Enlightenment starting with the Glorious Revolution, we shall both fail to grasp both the origin of the present interest in gender studies across the world, and the resistance and negotiation which each and every time have marked the invention of new cultural norms and new types of knowledge to regulate gender relations.

I shall start this argumentation with two tentative definitions of the concepts of gender and legitimacy. To put simply, I would say that sex is not gender. While the former is biological the latter is cultural. In other words, we were not born man and woman but we become them when we enter the symbolical order of language and culture that naturalise through discursive statements these sexual differences. This is more or less the definition that specialists in the field of gender studies mostly agree on.

Now, I would argue that if this process of naturalisation of sexual differences into gender differences has always existed, it is during that period when man (in the generic sense) tried to derive natural or rational laws from the observation of nature that gender relations started to be theorised, discussed in the public space. The period came to be known to us as the Enlightenment. As is always the case when genealogical issues are raised, it is somewhat abusively that we point to Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1687) as the official inaugurator of the Enlightenment age in England. It is as such that Newton's contemporary poet Alexander Pope hailed him, when he published his second book *Optics* (1704) which laid down the laws of reflection and refraction: "Nature, and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night,/ God said, Let Newton Be! And All was light," Pope tells us (Quoted in Porter Roy, 2001).

Indeed, Newton's law of universal gravitation which explains that the physical universe is knowable through the application of reason and operating according to simple, rational laws soon disseminates into the political, moral and aesthetic domains. It is arguably a coincidence, but scarcely a year after the publication of Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, the English Glorious Revolution (1688) took place. The Stuart King James II, abdicated the throne for the Dutch prince William of Orange and Mary. As you can guess, this Glorious Revolution took place against a crisis of legitimacy for political rule marking the whole reign of the Stuart dynasty reaching its climax with the James II's abdication from the throne. You understand that this crisis of legitimacy is linked to judicial and political processes through which we decide who has the right to govern and to exercise power in the various spheres of life including the private sphere. Two important books have to be mentioned in this regard: Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1680). Though these two works defend two different political theories of social contract deduced from the study of man's nature, they join together in providing a secular vindication of Stuart Dynasty's theory of divine rule. What is particularly interesting in our case is that this defence of the tottering regime of the Stuarts as the

title of Filmer's and Hobbes's books make it clear is made in the gendered term of the father, the King as the patriarch and that Biblical monster Leviathan that inspire fear and control the subject's quest for unlimited power that can threaten the absolute power of the King. Resistance is inexistent in Filmer's and Hobbes's political theories wherein, because of their corrupt nature, men are imagined as surrendering naturally all their rights just as fearful women have to do at the level of the family and state the moment they subscribe to the positive laws in a social contract or covenant.

As key apologies for the Stuart regime, Hobbes's and Filmer's political theories did not work out the crisis of legitimacy since the Glorious Revolution took place. This crisis of legitimacy could not be healed with political theories thought or elaborated out of an episteme, a political knowledge (the theory of divine rule) whose status was already in crisis, and challenged by the Newtonian paradigm more in tune with the times. Newton's epistemological breakthrough provides for John Locke stones and bricks for constructing a new idea of social contract to legitimate the new political regime that issued after the Glorious Revolution. The appeal to rational faculties, the delegation of power to representatives, the rule by consent and the right to resist tyranny are some of the epistemological ingredients that Locke used to elaborate his political theory and idea of social contract in his *Treatises of Government* (1690).

Though it excludes women who are placed under the tutelage of men as fathers and husbands on the basis of their sexual differences and mental make up as if the mind or soul has sex, Locke's treatises have opened an epistemological avenue for the expression of resistance and a demand for the renegotiation of a social contract for which women have not given their consent. Following Jurgen Habermas's claims in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1992), too much scope has been given in the literature to a supposed exclusion of women from the public sphere and their confinement to the private domestic sphere in the Republic of Letters of the Enlightenment English society. Today, there is enough textual evidence to prove that women did not remain passive, that they

entered those coffee houses where bourgeois enlightened public opinion was fashioned, and that they wrote essays and articles to critique and resist that man-centred modern Enlightenment project that Locke elaborated for the English society. One of these women is Mary Astell who as early as 1700, in an essay entitled "Some Reflection upon Marriage," and with reference to the previous Stuart regime and Locke's denunciation of it argues that if an "absolute rule is illegitimate in the state, it ought to be so in the family." These are some rhetorical questions that Astell addresses to the public opinion of the time: "If absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to so in a family? Or if in a Family, why not in a State; since no reason can alleged for the one that will not hold more strongly for the other? If the Authority of the Husband, so far as it extends, is sacred and inalienable, why not that of the Prince? The domestic sovereign is without dispute elected, and the stipulations and contract mutual; is it not then partial to men to the last degree, to contend for and practice that arbitrary dominion in their families (1700: 563)."

This example is one among many illustrating the resisting engagement of women against exclusion from the social contract and the attempt to inscribe themselves in the Enlightenment project. As I have tried to put the case, this resistance could not have happened without a crisis of legitimacy and a crisis in the status of the premodern forms of knowledge that supported the Stuart Dynasty. The shift to a modern form of legitimacy brought out by resistance to the political status quo by men has enabled women to voice their own resistance against a gendered exclusion. In what follows I would further argue that there is a recognisable pattern of appropriation and abrogation of men's thought in their quest for new forms of legitimacy as older forms of legitimacy and the older knowledge bases that sustain them reach a point of crisis. The visible sign of this series of crisis in legitimacy and episteme can be seen in the American Revolution and the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century that enabled Mary Wollstonecraft to write her *Vindications of the Rights of Women* (1792) wherein she both appropriates and abrogates Jean Jacques Rousseau's thought about gender issues

particularly about what he calls “the duties of women” in *Emile* (1762). The sign of resistance can also be in James Stuart Mill’s appropriation and abrogation of the abolitionist ideology in *On Subjection of Women* (1852). It can be read in the appropriation and abrogation of Marx’s emancipating thought following the 1848 revolutions in order to defend women as a class.

In the fourth quarter of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, it was the grand narratives – history, philosophy, religion, anthropology, psychology, in short the human and social sciences – that came to a point of crisis. Until then they had determined men’s sense of legitimacy for various enterprises including colonisation. As “Things began to fall Apart,” intellectuals began to question the truth of these narratives which directly and indirectly gave legitimacy to totalitarian regimes and two world wars that killed millions of people. You understand that the questioning, and the suspicion of these grand narratives based on dichotomies like man versus woman, techne versus physis, spirit versus body, etc is not gender neutral. In front of this crisis in the status of knowledge (anthropological, philosophical, religious, political etc), and the crisis of legitimacy that this entails, men turned to the exploration of that matter, the physis, that womanly space or body, the space of the Other par excellence that men ignored in the construction of the modernist project. Suspicion of the status of the old categories and dichotomies of thought led to deconstruction and the announcement of the post-modern condition, to use respectively Jacques Derrida and Jean François Lyotard’s words. Admittedly, this crisis of the modern episteme contributed to a large extent to make gender an object of interest, but this alone cannot explain the institution of gender studies as an area of academic research. For an immediate reason, we have to look in the direction of those large social and generational movements of resistance against the political status quo in the mid-1960s and early 1970s: May 1968 in France, the Civil Rights Movement in America in the 1960s and 1970s, the Angry Young Men in Britain during the same decades. These social movements constitute a visible sign of the crisis of the legitimacy of the old patriarchal order. Being

the first to suffer from this patriarchal order, women were not the last to enter in resistance against it. In the United States of America, the call to arms of the women's movement was given by Betty Freida's *The Feminine Mystique* (1965). In this book, she denounces the use of the Freudian theory of psychology to adjust women to their condition as housewives in an affluent society which the reduction of political talks between the US and the USSR during the first phases of the Cold War into the now famous kitchen debate between Henry Kesinger and Kroutchev.

Very often historians tend to reduce the Civil Rights Movement in the United States into a racial minority issue overlooking the fact that it is also a gender issue. Just as it obliged the political establishment to include Black Studies in the curricula of several departments of human and social sciences across the country, it also instituted gender studies in the same academia. It has to be observed that if these gender studies gained academic recognition, it is also because of the diffusion of French post-structuralist thought in US universities. To the political evolution of the American society from a consensus era to an era of social contestation corresponded an unprecedented travelling of French post-structuralist and postmodernist ideas through translation and visiting professors. It did not take long before these gender studies were repackaged and exported to educational institutions in Europe and the world at large.

Now if we come to think of it, we can define gender studies as a cross-disciplinary research area involving traditionally compartmentalised disciplines of human and social sciences like history, anthropology, sociology, theology, psychology, literary studies, philosophy etc. The crisis of legitimacy of these human and social science disciplines also reflected a crisis of legitimacy of the academia that is the ideological apparatuses within which these disciplines are taught. As you already know, what is to be taught and how to be taught in these academia is also largely determined by developments in social philosophies about education and schooling and in pedagogic theories of learning. What have enabled us to sit together and discuss the issue of Resistance, Negotiation and Gender at this university today, is the

crisis of legitimacy and shift in this social philosophy of education, and a move, to quote Paolo Freire, towards a “pedagogy of the oppressed” or critical pedagogy. Together with Claire Kramch, we can distinguish two major models in this critical pedagogy according to their orientation to power and domination: the reproductive models and the resistance models. If the reproductive models of pedagogy and schooling provide as Kramch writes it, a “language of critique,” to deconstruct gender dominant schooling processes, resistance models offer a “language of possibility,” for resisting gender domination and renegotiating gender relations (Kramch Claire, 2009). As a parting word, I shall say that the periods of crises in political and social legitimacy which are becoming increasingly shorter and the crises over the status of knowledge have resulted in the rethinking of all relations of power by closely connected schools of thought such as post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, neo-Marxism and last but not least feminism. Arguments and debates between these schools and within these schools on how to develop resistant thinking in terms of gender relations is still going on in Western academia. The same arguments and debates are taking place in the Algerian university today. The major issue to be negotiated in these debates about gender relations is whether the turn has come for us to make the Enlightenment project our own or leap ahead history by inscribing ourselves in a post-modern discourse following in this the major cultural current in the West.

Notes and references

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